

History Research Center

North Vietnam

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), or North Vietnam, as it became commonly known after the 1954 Geneva Accords, came into existence on September 2, 1945. Following the Japanese surrender in [World War II](#), Vietnamese Communist Party (Vietminh) leader [Ho Chi Minh](#) seized the opportunity and declared Vietnamese independence. Vietminh strength was centered in the north. The French, however, were disinclined to accept this, and moved to reimpose their colonial rule over the entire region. They quickly established control in the south, although they could not effectively control the countryside.

Since the French and the Vietminh hoped to avoid a full-scale war, both sides entered into intermittent negotiations. In March 1946 the French provisionally recognized the DRV in exchange for Ho's agreement to include the north in a proposed French Union. Final agreement remained elusive, however, and the relationship between the two sides continued to deteriorate. In November 1946 the French shelled the port of Haiphong. Ho and his supporters escaped into the mountains in the north and began a war of nationwide resistance.

The war against the French unfolded against the backdrop of the emerging [cold war](#). On the battlefield, the Vietminh relied on the military genius of General [Vo Nguyen Giap](#). They also seized land belonging to French landowners and alleged traitors and redistributed it to peasants, winning popular support. The French were decisively defeated at the Battle of [Dien Bien Phu](#) in May 1954. At the Geneva Conference that followed, Ho was pressured by the Soviet Union and the [People's Republic of China](#) to accept a compromise. The result was the partitioning of Vietnam, with the promise of nationwide elections in 1956. Those elections never took place. Although he had envisioned the establishment of an independent government over all of Vietnam, Ho had to accept a truncated Democratic Republic of Vietnam north of the 17th parallel.

With the official formation of the DRV, North Vietnam became the first communist state in Southeast Asia, with Ho Chi Minh as president and Hanoi as its capital. Political power rested in the Communist Party, or the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP), as it had been renamed in 1951. The power nucleus of the VWP was the Politburo, which was responsible for day-to-day decision making.

The primary task that confronted Ho and his colleagues was the need to consolidate their rule. At Geneva the DRV leadership had issued a directive that indicated its intention to proceed cautiously and take gradual steps toward establishing a socialist economy. In order to reassure the population, the government announced that the country would operate with a mixed economy, indicating acceptance of private wealth and property. At the same time, the government also stated its intention to respect the freedom of religion.

These pronouncements failed to reassure many in the north, and after the partition some 800,000 refugees made the trek south. An official policy of fair treatment for Catholics notwithstanding, many leaders in the VWP and others in local party and government structures continued to nurture suspicion of them, and harsh treatment of Catholics bred resentment in some areas.

The economy, which had been devastated by years of war, posed a tremendous challenge to the government. Moreover, fleeing refugees left many businesses abandoned. The DRV government moved to nationalize certain sectors of the economy such as utilities, banking, and some large enterprises. Prices and wages also came under government regulation.

The industrial sector had remained underdeveloped under French rule. In 1961 the government launched the first Five-Year Plan to develop heavy industry. By the middle of the decade war with the United States diverted resources from industrial development and stalled these efforts. The agricultural sector required immediate attention since food was in chronically short supply. This, as well as the need to win over the rural population, seemed to demand land reform. In 1955 the government launched a program to confiscate land from wealthy landlords for redistribution.

The land reform program, however, produced mixed results. On the positive side it increased the rates of landownership, increased rice production, reduced the influence of wealthy landlords, and won the support of numerous poor peasants who reaped the benefits. On the negative side, overzealous cadres and poor peasants often denounced those who owned only

medium-sized holdings, and local tribunals executed many. In 1956 the hostility eventually erupted in a peasant uprising in the province of Nghe An. Ho Chi Minh publicly admitted that errors had been made and slowed the pace of land reform. But within two years the government initiated a large-scale collectivization effort that brought most of the rural population into some form of state-controlled cooperative farming.

The VWP also created party-run organizations that recruited different segments of Vietnamese society, including veterans, workers, farmers, youths, and women. By mobilizing the population into various communist-led organizations, the VWP realized its domination of Vietnamese society.

The consolidation and nation-building efforts in the north also included increasingly harsh efforts to silence criticism and dissent. Freedom of expression was curbed. Authors of protest literature came under increasing public attack from 1958 onward. Culprits were sent to work in agricultural cooperatives or work camps to be reeducated.

The South Vietnamese government's decision to boycott the elections planned for 1956 compelled the North Vietnamese leadership to decide the priority it would give to reunification. By and large the DRV leadership decided to adhere to the decision to build socialism in the north while searching for some means to reunify the country. Debates in the VWP Central Committee in the mid-1950s, however, suggested that the leadership anticipated reunification to be realizable only after a military struggle.

In 1959 the VWP shifted to a more activist approach and began to approve efforts to increase pressure on [Ngo Dinh Diem's](#) regime in the south. By this point a broad-based resistance movement against Diem had gained strength. In late 1960, largely at the behest of southern cadres, the National Liberation Front was created as an umbrella organization that rallied a broad range of anti-Diem resistance.

The road to the reunification of Vietnam led the DRV to war against the United States, whose commitment to a noncommunist South Vietnam had grown steadily. Between 1965 and 1973 U.S. combat troops fought in the [Vietnam War](#). Some evidence suggests that Hanoi had begun infiltrating troops into the south in late 1964. Supplies and men flowed south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos and Cambodia.

In January 1973, after several rounds of peace talks, the Paris Peace Accords ended U.S. involvement. The cease-fire between north and south broke down, and the war resumed. On April 30, 1975, victorious North Vietnamese forces captured Saigon and achieved Ho's dream of a unified Vietnam. In his honor Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City in 1976, in a country now renamed the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Further Information

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